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U.S. Army Attaché Called Target Of Soviet Plot to Compromise Him

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MOSCOW, Feb. 16 — Maj. James R. Holbrook, an assistant Army attaché at the American Embassy, appears to have been the object of an operation by the Soviet security services aimed at compromising him.

Little but that appears to be clear in the welter of unconfirmed and contradictory reports in diplomatic circles in Moscow after the major's abrupt reassignment to Washington.

Although United States Embassy officials refused to comment on the case, the versions that have been passed out privately by other Western diplomats, who claim to have got them from their American colleagues, agree on several points.

According to these versions, the 41-year-old major, while on a trip to the Ukraine in mid-January, stopped overnight in the town of Rovno en route to Lvov near the Polish border. He is said to have run into a Soviet acquaintance who was also passing through Rovno and who took him to a party where an apparently prearranged attempt to compromise him took place. What form the attempt took, how successful it was and whether the purpose was to blackmail him into becoming a Soviet agent or simply to have him shipped home by the embassy remains unclear.

Returned to Moscow at Once

Major Holbrook, who is fluent in Russian, is understood to have been knowledgeable enough that he had had little supervision from the embassy since his as-

signment to Moscow in April 1979. He is said to have had wide Soviet contacts that, some diplomats speculated, might have been cause enough for the Soviet security authorities to want to get rid of him.

Whatever took place in Rovno, it caused Major Holbrook to return directly to Moscow and to report on it to his superiors. He was immediately flown out of the country.

Western European colleagues who noted his departure were given varying explanations. One was that he had been reassigned to Washington because he was being considered for the post of adviser on Soviet affairs to Vice President Bush.

However, the general assumption among Western diplomats here is that this explanation was a "cover story" meant to smooth over the incident.

In Washington, Mr. Bush's office confirmed that Major Holbrook had been one of four people considered for the advisory post but said no selection had been made.